



CHIEF's Sight Picture

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Stressed Airmen – Who's Your Wingman?

Stress is nothing new to military life and there are many factors that contribute to this. But lately, stress has been taking its toll on our Airmen. Our suicide rate is skyrocketing while accidental deaths are more than 36% above what they were four years ago. We lost 57 people to suicide in the past year – a dramatic, and tragic, increase from last year. We lost another 99 Airmen to accidents. Combined, that's an order of magnitude greater than our combat losses in both Iraq and Afghanistan since September 11, 2001. We're causing ourselves more harm than the enemy. We must do a better job of looking after one another – be better wingmen.

Our jobs are inherently stressful. This is a fact of our profession. We have over 30,000 Airmen deployed across the globe, with over 7,000 of them in a combat environment. Many Airmen are now on their sixth deployment in ten years. Those at home face increased work hours, inconsistent manning, and a continuous workload. More stress comes from uncertainty. In addition, increased AEF deployment periods, force restructuring, Non-Commissioned Officer retraining, and OSD's BRAC assessments and potential base closures may suggest an ambiguous or unstable future to some Airmen. This can often lead to other stress factors, like family or relationship problems, financial or legal problems, and substance abuse. We are taking steps to mitigate some of these factors, but stress will always be a concern. Stress is a problem we can manage.

The Air Force leadership is confronting this problem. We cannot relieve the tempo of deployment. When our nation calls, we must respond. However, we can and will work to provide our Airmen with the support they need to carry their load. We are reinvigorating our suicide prevention program that had dramatically dropped the number of suicides over the past seven years. The program worked, but it needs a shot in the arm. Along with suicide prevention, we're continuing to focus on safety and risk management, with zero mishaps as our goal.

November begins the busy holiday season. This is a time of celebration, but also a time when stress rises. Our Major Commands will be placing special emphasis on stress-related issues during the month of November. We will: reemphasize the support services available; review the signs of stress; and remind all Airmen what it means to look out for each other – to be good wingmen.

However, this problem cannot be solved through programs and training sessions alone. It's going to take an effort from the whole force, from our commanders and supervisors to every Airman in the force. It will take your total commitment.

Commanders – you bear the responsibility for the total welfare of our greatest asset – Airmen. You are responsible for their physical, emotional, social, and spiritual well-being. Use your base resources. You should know when your Airmen need help, and where to send them to get it.

Supervisors – you are our first line of defense. Like commanders, you are responsible for the well-being of the people you supervise. It is you who look every Airman in the eye every day. It is you who can spot the first signs of trouble, and you who are in the best position to listen and engage.

Airmen – be good wingmen. Take care of yourself and those around you. Step in when your wingman needs help. Signs of stress and suicide should not be dismissed. Neither should senseless risks to life and limb because of improper safety and irresponsible behavior.

In today's expeditionary Air Force, commanders and supervisors are often deployed. We rely on those who remain behind as acting commanders and supervisors to be familiar with the stresses confronting their Airmen and to be familiar with all the tools necessary to deal with these stresses.

I need everyone's help on this. Take care of your wingmen on the ground so we can continue to confront America's enemies from air and space. Stress is not going away; it is a reality we must accept and manage. We are the world's greatest Air and Space Power because of you, America's Airmen. The needless loss of one Airman is one loss too many. Look out for each other – look out for your wingman.



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